

Off the Shelves

Looking for Answers to Big Questions: Religion in Current Young Adult Literature

Adolescence can be a tumultuous time for everyone. Changes—physical, emotional, social—come fast and furious, and the search for identity becomes much more pronounced. Part of that identity search is often spiritual; for many young adults, the teen years are a time to ask questions, seek answers, and find a place for themselves within the world. Values and beliefs that are held by parents, extended family, and peers can reinforce or challenge teens, and for some, answers are never clearly revealed, if at all. In the fictional world of young adult literature, some recent titles examine questions of religion. Readers may use these works to understand how others have tackled these personal issues, and perhaps how they can approach the issues themselves. I should make clear that I am not endorsing using these novels to directly teach religion to our students; that is not our role, nor would I want any teacher under my guidance to take on such a personal matter. However, I do think that works such as these can provide useful windows for adolescents who may be think-

ing about the place of religion in their lives.

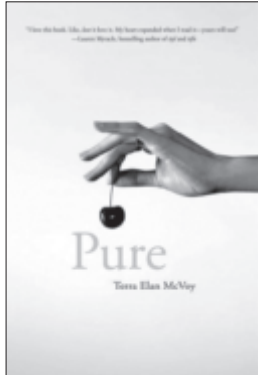
There are countless YA titles that deal, at least tangentially, with religion. Some “classic” YA books such as Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* (Dell, 1970), Chaim Potok’s *My Name Is Asher Lev* (Fawcett Crest, 1972), and Katherine Paterson’s *Jacob Have I Loved* (Avon, 1980) deal directly with questions of faith, and reading these works again provides an interesting comparison with today’s titles, in which teen characters wrestle with essentially the same internal conflicts. However, in some of the titles below, the authors show how religion can affect not only the individual but also a larger circle of people, including family and the community.

Simone, the 16-year-old protagonist of Dana Reinhardt’s *A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life*

(Wendy Lamb, 2006), has always known she was adopted and yet has never harbored any desire to meet her birth mother. She has a happy and satisfying life, both at home and at school. All that changes abruptly when Simone’s parents tell her that her birth mother, Rivka, wants to meet her. While Simone’s family is atheist, Rivka is a Hasidic Jew, self-exiled from her family. After some initial resistance, Simone agrees to meet and quickly learns that Rivka is dying of ovarian cancer. In the time they have left together, Rivka and Simone become closer, and their developing relationship challenges Simone’s belief in God, a belief that she didn’t realize she had. While Reinhardt’s debut novel is a story of family, and how *family* can be defined, it is also a beautifully written novel of faith and belief and the ability of adolescents to ask the difficult questions. Simone’s questions stem not from a stereotypical sense of teenage rebellion but rather from a genuine search for herself, supported by a loving home environment. Reinhardt handles this tale with sensitive reflection tempered with moments of great humor.

Tabitha, the 15-year-old narrator of Terra Elan McVoy’s *Pure* (Simon Pulse, 2009), demonstrates her commitment to abstinence before marriage by wearing



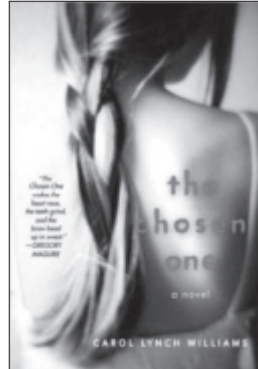


a purity ring, as do her four close friends. When one member of the group confesses to having had sex with her boyfriend, the girls' loyalties are tested, and Tabitha must examine her friendships and her own reasons for wearing her ring. Each of the girls in the group actually wears the ring for their own reasons, and McVoy draws out the distinctions among the friends. McVoy presents readers with the religious and social ramifications of wearing a purity ring while showing the personal struggles that Tabitha faces as she tries to live her faith in the midst of the complexities of friendship. While it would have been relatively easy, I suspect, for McVoy to steer her novel into a sermon on the evils of premarital sex, instead she takes a thoughtful approach to the topic. This is a strong book about what it means to maintain one's values, but it's also, more broadly, about what it means to hold a promise: a promise to friends, to a higher being, and to oneself.

In *The Chosen One* (St. Martin's, 2009), Carol Lynch Williams explores the extreme fringe of religious devotion, taking readers inside a polygamous compound. Thirteen-year-old Kyra has grown up surrounded by a large and loving family, and she views her iso-

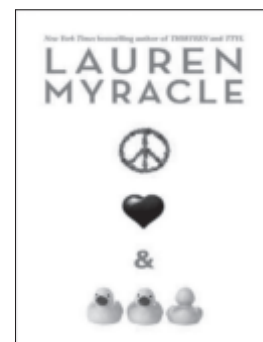
lated community unquestioningly as the way things have always been. But she is now approaching the age when she will be expected to become a wife herself, and when she is chosen to be her uncle's seventh wife, she vehemently resists. Her family urges Kyra to accept things the way they are, but Kyra has seen a world beyond the boundaries of the compound. Her maturation is furthered by her relationship with Joshua, a boy also living among the Chosen, and by her visits to the mobile library that travels nearby. But defying marriage to her uncle means defying the Prophet, and "Chosen girls" never defy the Prophet. This is a disturbing read but a rewarding one; without resorting to graphic depictions, Williams examines the incestuous nature of some forced marriages. The strength that develops within Kyra throughout the book is powerful, and Williams lets you see Kyra's movement toward her final decision, step by painful step.

Readers will palpably feel the struggles experienced by Andi Grant, the protagonist of Neil Connelly's *The Miracle Stealer* (Levine, 2010), as her personal beliefs collide with those of her family and neighbors. Andi's six-year-old brother, Daniel, survived



a fall down a well shaft when he was a toddler, and since then, the residents of their small Pennsylvania town have come to believe that Daniel is blessed with special powers. Believers begin to credit him with healing the sick, communicating with the dead, and even bringing the fish back to the local lake. Andi cares deeply for her brother, wants him to have a normal childhood, and resents the way her mother and the townspeople seem to exploit Daniel for their own needs. Where others see miracles, she sees adults projecting their beliefs onto a young boy. Above all, Andi worries about the guilt her brother could take on if one day his "powers" fail him. She just wants people to leave Daniel alone. When more believers begin to find their way to the town, Andi must take desperate measures to save Daniel from those who would follow him. This is a taut, suspenseful novel that also carefully explores the nature of Andi's faith and how that faith is repeatedly tested by what she sees, and what remains unknown.

At first glance, the cover and title of Lauren Myracle's *Peace, Love, and Baby Ducks* (Dutton, 2009) would lead a reader to believe that the novel is much lighter than it really is. Myracle is a master at mixing serious topics



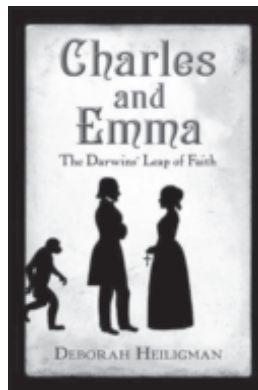
with great humor, and this title is no exception. Fifteen-year-old Carly returns from a summer of volunteer work, self-actualized and aware, to find that her younger sister, Anna, has quickly grown into a ninth grader who attracts all sorts of attention from the boys at their private Christian school in Atlanta. Carly becomes increasingly jealous of her younger sister, and as the school year progresses, their relationship shifts, varying from guardianship and support to vicious fighting. While *Myracle* nails the sibling relationship in the novel, the links to religion are clear throughout as Carly starts to question her “Holy Roller” classmates after her life-altering summer. Carly sees how some of her friends seem to use religion cynically, as a means to be perceived as good, rather than truly doing good, unselfish deeds. A wonderful novel about sisterhood, *Peace, Love, and Baby Ducks* also proves to be an insightful examination of what it really means to treat others well.

The religious questioning that all teens go through may be intensified for a “PK,” or “pastor’s kid.” Such is the case for 15-year-old Sam, the narrator of Sara Zarr’s moving *Once Was Lost* (Little, 2009). Sam used to believe in her stable and perfect family, in the constancy of her friends, and in a loving God who watches over and protects all. Her faith in all of these things is shaken considerably when her mother enters rehab, her pastor father begins to spend suspicious amounts of time with other members of the congregation, and her relationships with her friends begin to change. When the younger sister of her



friend is kidnapped, Sam starts to feel her grip on her faith slip further and further out of reach. From this description, you may think that the novel is overpacked with storylines, but in Zarr’s capable hands, these plot lines weave and intersect in ways that flow evenly and cleanly, and Zarr treats her characters, and their flaws, with the intelligence and respect they deserve. In Sam, Zarr has created a character with earnest yet conflicted faith, someone in whom readers can easily see themselves. Sam’s ability to find and maintain her faith, even in the face of horrible situations around her, underscores her movement from child to adult, from one who wants to believe to one who truly does.

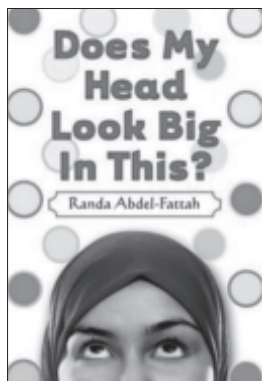
For a nonfiction take on religious faith, Deborah Heiligman’s *Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith* (Holt, 2009) offers



a fascinating perspective on the origin of one of the world’s most well-known scientific theories and the role that faith played in its development. Most of us are aware of Darwin’s atheistic leanings, but it would be too simplistic to refer to his landmark work as a heretical treatise. Instead, Heiligman’s research reveals how Darwin’s marriage to the much more devout Emma Wedgwood affected his thinking and the way he adjusted the tone of his writing. Emma, with her tolerant and reasonable faith, served as Charles’s first reader and harshest editor, and it’s instructive to consider the ways evolutionary theory might be different today were it not for the couple’s private conversations about the relationship between science and religion. In the hands of a good teaching team, the interdisciplinary possibilities of this book (coupled with a science unit) are tremendous.

Contemporary young adult literature can also provide excellent opportunities for readers to discover religions and traditions that may differ from their own. Currently, it may be difficult to find a religion that is more misinterpreted and misunderstood than Islam. Polls have shown that large numbers of Americans hold negative views of the religion and may easily conflate Muslims and acts of fanatical violence. Adolescent literature with richly drawn, realistic Muslim characters can counter these perspectives of the Islam faith and reveal to readers the beauty of other cultures.

Books such as Randa Abdel-Fattah’s offer glimpses of such beauty. In her debut novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

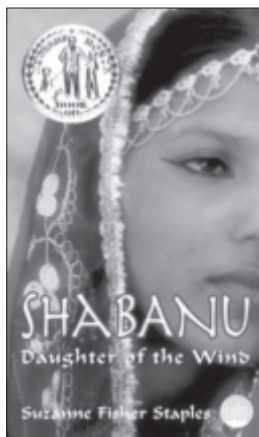


(Orchard, 2007), 16-year-old Amal, a Palestinian, is a devout Muslim who enjoys many of the trappings of modern culture, such as television and texting. When she decides to wear the hijab, the traditional Muslim head covering, full-time, she does it as a means of displaying her deeply felt faith. Yet, she must endure insults and misconceptions of Muslims from other students at her prep school, and she is even refused a part-time job based on the employer's preconceived notions of her religion. Through it all, Amal handles herself with good humor while still remaining a believable teen character. The book strikes a fine balance between the usual high school concerns (boyfriends, social life) and serious issues of faith and culture without becoming preachy. In Abdel-Fattah's second novel, *Ten Things I Hate*



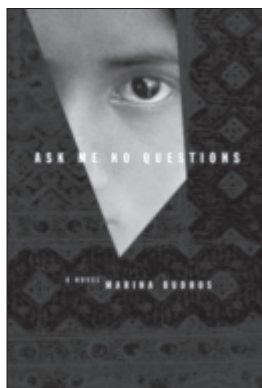
about Me (Orchard, 2009), Jamilah attempts to keep her Lebanese-Muslim identity a secret while at school by dyeing her hair blonde, wearing contacts, and looking the other way when her classmates make racist remarks. Prejudice against Muslims abounds in both of these titles, and Abdel-Fattah is to be commended for drawing attention to the ways in which Muslim teens (and all teens) struggle with their identities.

Suzanne Fisher Staples draws on her experiences in South Asia, both as a UPI foreign news reporter and a literacy specialist, to paint portraits of young girls from other cultures, and her books explain and portray beliefs of both Islam and Hinduism. Staples's Shabanu trilogy, including *Sba-*



banu: Daughter of the Wind (Knopf, 1989), *Haveli* (Knopf, 1993), and *The House of Djinn* (Farrar, 2008), traces the life of a young girl in Pakistan. Staples expertly juxtaposes modern culture and notions of love and relationships with traditional tenets of Islam. Younger readers will also enjoy her *Under the Persimmon Tree* (Farrar, 2005), which critically examines the stereotypical image of Muslims as fundamentalist fanatics through the story of a girl forced to move to a refugee camp in Pakistan following a Taliban attack on her village in Afghanistan.

In *Ask Me No Questions* (Simon, 2006), Marina Budhos tells the story of 14-year-old Nadira, who, with her older sister and parents, has emigrated from Bangladesh to New York City in the hopes of becoming legal US citizens. After 9/11, however, immigration regulations are tightened, and the family rushes to Canada for asylum. When Nadira's father is detained at the border with visa issues, she and her sister are sent back to New York and must work together to prevent their family's deportation. Nadira's religion is certainly a major issue in this work, as is the reaction to Muslims immediately following the 9/11 attacks, but at the same time, her background




occasionally feels pushed to the background to further the plot line of immigration.

This raises, for me, an important consideration when looking for books to review for this column, particularly those dealing with Islam. While there are many books that feature Muslim characters, in a number of those titles terrorism, or the threat of terrorism, remains a prominent plot point. While there are certainly many readers who will incorrectly asso-

ciate all Muslims with terrorists, to constantly invite the comparisons in books seems too easy, even though authors do make efforts to highlight the differences between narrow-minded stereotypes and much truer, more realistic portraits of Muslims. Another point to stress is the sharp discrepancy between the number of YA titles dealing with Christianity in some regard and those dealing with Islam. Readers of YA literature are among the most savvy, discriminating audiences around, and they are ready for excellent titles that give them snapshots of other cultures. Titles such as those in this column are an outstanding start for a reader looking to expand his or her horizons; but there is room for so much more on bookshelves.

Spiritual beliefs are extremely important to many adolescents. Findings of a 2008 study published by the National Study of

Youth and Religion reporting on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents indicate that while the importance of religion decreases as adolescents age, about half of the adolescents surveyed indicated that their faith was very or extremely important to them (Denton, Pearce, and Smith 22). Young people who are seeking to develop and expand their personal sense of spirituality may find the books listed here helpful. At the same time, they can help adolescents ask meaningful, critical questions about religion and spirituality and how they influence the world. 

Work Cited

Denton, Melinda Lundquist, Lisa D. Pearce, and Christian Smith. *Religion and Spirituality on the Path through Adolescence*. National Study of Youth and Religion. 2008. Web. 14 Jan. 2011.

Search for a New Editor of *English Journal*

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *English Journal*. In July 2013, the term of the present editor, Ken Lindblom, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 15, 2011**. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing, and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editor. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the search committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in February 2012 will effect a transition, preparing for her or his first issue in September 2013. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be sent electronically to Kurt Austin, Publications Director, kaustin@ncte.org, or by mail to Kurt Austin, *English Journal* Editor Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

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